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For eight weeks in the summer of 1964, more than 2,000 Negro youngsters, averaging 15 years of age but ranging from 6 to 26 and older, went to Freedom Schools in Mississippi. The students were taught by teachers who met no official qualifications; they assembled in church basements or on the streets; they came and went without attendance records, grades, or examinations. It was an experiment that cannot be assessed in terms of "success" or "failure" in the usual sense, but it was a venture which deserves close attemtion by all Americans interested in the relationship between education and social change.

Because there were no attendance requirements, no effort was made to teach an organized outline of Negro history or American government. Each day's activities varied. Role playing was used to present Barry Goldwater's stand on the Civil Rights Bill and the view of those who opposed his position. Often the teacher would begin class by reading an editorial on something the governor had said, and discussion followed for the rest of the period. One teacher spent a whole hour discussing the word "skeptical" and telling students to think for themselves, not taking the teacher's word for everything.

The Freedom Schools present a challenge to American education by suggesting that an entire school system can be created in a community outside the official order. The experiment shows how teachers were selected, not by any mechanical set of requirements, but on the bases of general intelligence, enthusiasm, and social conscience. They taught not from textbooks, but from life, trying to link the daily headlines with the best of man's intellectual tradition.

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EDUCATION WITHOUT SCHOOLS IN THE SOUTH

Howard Zinn

There has been a great deal of discussion about the Freedom Schools established in Mississippi this past summer. But almost all of the discussion has concentrated on the racial aspects of the experiment and avoided the less obvious educational lessons. Mr. Zinn teaches government at Boston University and is the author of two recently published books, The Southern Mystique *and* S.N.C.C.: The New Abolitionists.

"For eight weeks, more than 2,000 Negro youngsters, averaging 15 years of age but ranging from 6 to 26 and older, went to schools which violated all the rules and regulations of educational orthodoxy. They were taught by teachers who met no official qualifications; they assembled in church basements or on the streets or in the fields; they came and went without attendance records, grades or examinations.

"It was an experiment that cannot be assessed in the usual terms of 'success' and 'failure,' and it would be wrong to hail it with an enthusiasm which would then lead it to be judged by traditional criteria. But that

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venture of last summer in Mississippi deserves close attention by all Americans interested in the relationship between education and social change. . . .

"No one paid attention to details like age requirements, so that at the opening of [one such] school, 60 kids showed up, from 6 to 19; [one teacher] marched the 6-to-10 children off to a corner, to read with them, and teach them freedom songs, and sound out French words whose English equivalents they had not yet discovered, and painstakingly correct their spelling.

"With the older ones—14 to 19—any idea of going in an organized way through an outline of Negro history or American government was soon dropped. Beyond a core of 7 or 8 who came faithfully every morning at nine and stayed until mid-afternoon, there were a dozen others who came and went as they liked. So the history professor started each day from where the mood struck him, from some point on which he thought the students' recognition might be fastened just long enough to pull them onward.

Education in context

"One day, it was an editorial in that morning's *Clarion-Ledger*, charging that civil rights workers were teaching people to break the law. 'What do you think about that editorial? Is it true? If you could write a letter to the editor about it, what would you say? . . . Here's paper and pencil, go ahead. We'll pick out one or two and *really* send them to the editor.' This was not education for grades, not writing for teacher's approval, but for an immediate use; it was a learning surrounded with urgency. And the students responded with seriousness, picking apart the issues: Are we for the law? Is there a higher law? When is civil disobedience justified? Then the teacher explored with them the differences between statutory law, constitutional law, 'natural' law.

"On another day, the teacher told his students about the annual fair he had visited the previous afternoon. It was held in Neshoba County where the bodies of the three murdered civil rights workers had just been discovered. A strain of tension and fear had pervaded the fair grounds. The teacher reported what speakers had told the crowds that day at the fair. Gov. Paul Johnson had said: 'It is not Mississippi's obligation to enforce Federal statutes.' A representative of the John Birch Society had said: 'I am for the Constitution, for freedom, for the open Bible.' The students were asked: Do you disagree? Aren't you for the Constitution? For freedom? The discussion became heated. Distinctions were drawn, and became more and more refined, all by the students themselves, the teacher just listening: 'Which Constitution does he mean, U.S. or Mississippi? . . . Maybe we're for different *parts* of the U.S. Constitution. . . . Well, maybe we're for the same part, but we *interpret* it differently.' . . .

"The kind of teaching that was done in the Freedom Schools was, despite its departure from orthodoxy—or, more likely, because of it—just about the best kind there is. For the teachers were selected not by any mechanical set of requirements but on the basis of general intelligence, enthusiasm and the kind of social conscience that would drive them to spend a hot summer in Mississippi without pay. They taught, not out of textbooks, but out of life, trying to link the daily headlines with the best and deepest of man's intellectual tradition.

"Their object was not to cram a prescribed amount of factual material into young minds, but to give them that first look into new worlds which would, some day if not immediately, lead them to books and people and ideas not found in the everyday lives of Mississippi Negroes. . . . In these

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classes, discussions of democracy, of the philosophy of nonviolence, were hardly academic. . . .

"Role playing was used very often in the Freedom Schools. 'Kids that age are natural actors,' a teacher explained. 'And it puts them in other people's shoes. We don't want to win easy arguments over straw foes. They have got to be tough thinkers, tough arguers.' The teacher listed on the blackboard Barry Goldwater's reasons for voting against the Civil Rights Bill: 1) It is unconstitutional. 2) No law will end prejudice ('We cannot pass a law that will make you like me or me like you.'). 3) It can't be enforced. 4) It violates the idea of states' rights. The class went over the arguments, with one boy portraying Goldwater, and defending his points powerfully, another trying to break them down.

"Outside on the street, in front of the building, an energetic, red-headed teacher was pointing to a blackboard propped up in the sun, the kids sitting in rows in the shade of the building. 'O.K., we can build any kind of community we want now. What will the rules be?' This was a hortatory kind of teaching, but a kind the schools fostered: constantly talking with students not just about what *is*, but about what *should be*. . . .

"One teacher spent a whole hour with his students discussing the word 'skeptical.' He told them: 'This is a Freedom School and we should mean what we say. We should feel free to think as we want, question whomever we like, whether it's our parents, our ministers, our teachers—yes, me, right here. Don't take my word for things. Check up on them. Be *skeptical.*' For these youngsters it was a new way of looking at the classroom. . . .

"The Freedom Schools' challenge to the social structure of Mississippi was obvious from the start. Its challenge to American education as a whole is more subtle. There is, to begin with, the provocative suggestion that an entire school system can be created in any community outside the official order, and critical of its suppositions. But beyond that, other questions were posed by the Mississippi experiment of last summer.

New goals for education

"Can we, somehow, bring teachers and students together, not through the artificial sieve of certification and examination but on the basis of their common attraction to an exciting social goal? Can we solve the old educational problem of teaching children crucial values, while avoiding a blanket imposition of the teacher's ideas? Can this be done by honestly accepting as an educational goal that we want better human beings in the rising generation than we had in the last, and that this requires a forthright declaration that the educational process cherishes equality, justice, compassion and world brotherhood? Is it not possible to create a hunger for those goals through the fiercest argument about whether or not they *are* worthwhile? And cannot the schools have a running, no-ideas-barred exchange of views about alternative ways to those goals?

"Is there, in the floating, prosperous, nervous American social order of the sixties, a national equivalent to the excitement of the civil rights movement, one strong enough in its pull to create a motivation for learning that even the enticements of monetary success cannot match? Would it be possible to declare boldly that the aim of the schools is to find solutions for poverty, for injustice, for race and national hatred, and to turn all educational efforts into a national striving for those solutions?

"Perhaps people can begin, here and there (not waiting for the government, but leading it) to set up other pilot ventures, imperfect but suggestive, like the one last summer in Mississippi. Education can, and should, be dangerous." ("Schools in Context: The Mississippi Idea," *The Nation*, Nov. 23, 1964)